Inside the Making of Mulholland Drive, David Lynch's Dark, Freudian Masterpiece

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Lili Anolik

THE DRIVER Writer-director David Lynch in 2001, the year *Mulholland Drive* was released.

By Kiino Villand/Trunk Archive.

These days it's *Twin Peaks* this, *Twin Peaks* that. A new season is coming, courtesy of Showtime, after the last ended 26 years ago, and everybody is once again talking about rooms that are red and lodges that are black, ladies who log and dwarfs who dance. Well, I don't want to talk about any of these things, don't want to talk about *Twin Peaks* at all, in fact. I want to talk about David Lynch's other TV show, his 2001 movie, *Mulholland Drive*. Only *Mulholland Drive* is *Twin Peaks*, or started out that way.

The Backstory (or You Want to Know, Don't You?)

It was supposed to be a spin-off. The basic idea was this: Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn), God's gift to saddle shoes and tight sweaters, the sweetest piece of cherry pie in the Pacific Northwest, especially after the death of her classmate and the homecoming queen, Laura Palmer, goes to Hollywood to seek fortune and, of course, fame. *Mulholland* would premiere at the same time *Twin Peaks*' third season premiered. There was no Twin Peaks third season, so there was no *Mulholland*. It hadn't even been born yet and *Mulholland Drive* was already dead.

In 1998, Tony Krantz, Lynch's television agent turned production partner, persuaded Lynch to bring it back to life. Lynch kept the title but junked the rest, cooking up a new batch of characters and situations. He and Krantz drove to ABC, where *Twin Peaks* had aired its original 30 episodes, in 1990 and 1991, and delivered a pitch. It sold on the spot. Krantz: "David had them at hello because they wanted to do anything he wanted to do." And then he did it and they discovered that it was the last thing they wanted. Their problem with Lynch's pilot was that it was, well, Lynchian: weird, creepy, slooow. ABC passed. The Thursday nine P.M. slot Lynch had hoped his show and its three unknown leads, Naomi Watts, Laura Elena Harring, and Justin Theroux, would fill was taken by *Wasteland*, Kevin Williamson's follow-up to *Dawson's Creek*. *Mulholland Drive* was even deader than before.

Another resurrection, however, was coming. In the summer of ‘99, StudioCanal’s Pierre Edelman offered to buy the rights to *Mulholland* from ABC, plus raise an additional $7 million to turn the pilot into a feature. Lynch accepted. He reconceived the footage he’d already shot, then wrote and filmed 18 new pages of script. *Mulholland* premiered at Cannes in 2001. While hugely lauded at the time, its reputation has only grown. In fact, according to a number of recent polls, including the prestigious BBC Culture, this two-time loser is the best movie of the 21st century.

Wasteland was canceled after three episodes.

The Director (or a Head Above the Rest)

Two things you need to know about David Lynch: he’s an Eagle Scout, and he trained as an Abstract Expressionist.

The Plot (or I Don’t Know Who I Am)

To know what’s going on in *Mulholland Drive* is to ask, What’s going on in *Mulholland Drive*? This isn’t a typical movie in which images and narrative support a story that’s being told. But one is. The tricky bit is describing it. The feeling is that to do so is to submit to a kind of cinematic Rorschach test, your perception of the inkblot/plot more revealing of you than the inkblot/plot. In other words, it’s a sucker’s game. And the temptation is to play it safe, tend to the gnomic. To say, for example, that *Mulholland* is a riddle that cannot be solved. Or a Grimm’s fairy tale set in the fantasy capital of the world, a neighborhood that is also a state of mind: Hollywood, California. Or, and now I’m quoting Lynch, “Part One: she found herself inside the perfect mystery. Part Two: a sad illusion. Part Three: love.” (Tough to beat Lynch for gnomic.) All of these characterizations are accurate, as far as they go. Which isn’t very.



Lynch on set with Laura Elena Harring and Justin Theroux, 2000.

From mptvimages.com.

So I'll go farther. *Mulholland Drive* is a movie in two halves of unequal length. The first two hours—the pilot, roughly—is about a bright-eyed blonde, Betty Elms (Watts), an aspiring actress who moves to Hollywood in the hopes of getting discovered, and encounters a beautiful dark-haired woman (Harring), who calls herself Rita but only because she has to call herself something. Rita, you see, was in a car accident from which she escaped with her life though not her memory. Betty and Rita team up and, like a couple of girl detectives, attempt to answer the question of Rita's identity. The final 30 minutes—the additional footage—is about a down-and-out never-was, Diane Selwyn (Watts), who hires a hit man to kill her treacherous movie-star lover, Camilla Rhodes (Harring). The film's first half is the fantasy of a racked Diane, reimagining her relationship with the now dead Camilla before firing a bullet into her own brain. So far, so comprehensible, right? Wrong. Because the story line I'm explaining I'm really imposing. The scenes and characters could be interpreted, reasonably, persuasively, in any number of ways.

Now I'll go even farther. In fact, I'll go all the way, which is full circle, back to gnomic. The truest description of *Mulholland Drive* is this: a dream turns into a wet dream turns into a nightmare.

The Dream (or Have You Ever Done This Before?)

I want to clarify. When I say *Mulholland Drive* is a dream, I don't mean a dream in that hokey, hack-y it's-all-just-a-dream sense, where the exhilarating or alarming thing that happened actually didn't. I mean a dream in the Freudian royal-road-to-the-unconscious sense, as if Lynch had removed the images projected on the backs of his eyelids and put them up on the screen. And it's why the plot holes—what's inside that blue box?—and disconnected or semi-connected scenario strands—the one involving Adam Kesher (Theroux), for instance, the director who's lost control of his film—make not the slightest bit of difference. And it's why *Mulholland Drive*, so incoherent, coheres perfectly. Dream logic, not narrative logic, is what it follows, and its dream logic is tight, sustained, flawless.

Yet, *Mulholland Drive* looks like a movie, meaning it looks like a genre movie. Or rather a genres movie. Five of them, by my count, in the first 30 minutes. Rita, a gorgeous amnesiac and shady lady of the night, is right out of a film noir; indeed she takes her name off a poster of *Gilda*, the 1946 Rita Hayworth vehicle. Betty is a Doris Day role, a Little Miss Sunshine virgin too cheerful and dumb to tweak to the fact that Rock Hudson's gay. Behind a diner, a man is confronted by a monster, dies of fright, in what could be an outtake from a horror picture. The scenes with Adam and the studio flunkies are Hollywood satire. And the way that Betty and Rita meet, Betty walking in on Rita in the

shower, is pure dirty-movie—or would be if Betty weren't so hopelessly clean-minded.

ABC'S PROBLEM WITH LYNCH'S PILOT WAS THAT IT WAS, WELL, LYNCHIAN: WEIRD, CREEPY, SLOOOW.

So Mulholland has more narrative than you can shake a stick at, except actually what it has is the illusion of narrative. And that's how Lynch gets you. You think you know what you're seeing—a film noir, say—only to realize you don't. You think again you know what you're seeing—a Doris Day comedy, say—only to again realize you don't. Add to this Lynch's dialogue, deliberately artificial-sounding; his pacing, somnambulant; his manner of staging and lighting real-world locations so that they appear unreal, beautiful and dire, painterly; and before you know it, you're lulled, hypnotized, slipping into a trance, a dream state. Which is right where he wants you, at his mercy, because at no time are we so vulnerable as in our dreams, our subliminal armor off, in an untidy heap at the foot of the bed, our hearts beating wetly, nakedly in our chests. And that's when the man who once confessed his "fantasy of sneaking into a girl's room, hiding, and observing her through the night" makes his move.

The Audition (or the Wet-Dream Part)

The movie's most famous scene comes at the midpoint, when Betty heads to a studio lot to read for a producer. *Mulholland*'s attitude toward show business, ironic, mocking, appalled, has already been established. And the setup here seems to indicate we're in for more of the same. The leading man, Woody Katz, is 20 years past his prime. The director speaks in pseudo-profundities. And since we heard Betty run the lines earlier with Rita, we know what drivel they are, purest corn melodrama. Woody, clearly using the audition as a chance to grope young female flesh, immediately gets Betty in a clinch. She seems distressed and distressingly polite. And then, all at once, she doesn't seem either. She flips the casting couch around, turning Woody into her prey, and the flat, tired material—a lover's quarrel—into something very exciting, very dangerous—a lover's quarrel that could end in orgasm or murder or both. It's the most effective demonstration imaginable of the power of performance and of make-believe and of the movies. And the room, full of jaded industry folk, is rapt, riveted, turned on.

Betty, too, is turned on. And, afterward, she can't turn off. Sleeping Beauty has had her sexual awakening, and her carnality is suddenly burning, out of control. I called Betty dumb a few paragraphs ago. In fact, she's smart, though she's smart in the way a child's smart—precocious. Yet in an instant, the moment she takes Woody's hovering hand and presses it into the swell of her hip, she is grown up, is simultaneously participant in and perpetrator of corrupt adult sexuality. At the scene's close, she's shaken, visibly unnerved.

Not because she's lost her innocence but because, as she now understands, she never had it in the first place, the dark knowledge in her the whole time. And isn't that exactly what coming-of-age feels like? Soon Betty will be exchanging looks with Adam, and considerably more than that with Rita.

Which brings us to the movie's second-most-famous scene, Betty and Rita's sex scene, sexy even for a sex scene, the sexiest. The heat generated in the movie so far has been boy-girl. And yet, there have been signs, subtle but definite, that something girl-girl is happening as well—Betty and Rita do touch an awful lot, stand awfully close—and we've picked up on these signs without quite knowing it. (Lynch, though, of course, did. There was no Betty-Rita romance in the pilot. Harring: "Naomi and I got along very, very well, and we had good chemistry. And there was one time where I sort of spanked her. It was innocent—like with my sisters. But David saw, and I think it sparked the creative process.") So it seems at once out of nowhere and perfectly right when Betty tells Rita, between rapt kisses, "I'm in love with you." This too: Lynch is the best pornographic director America's ever produced, along with the best art-house. How he sees is erotic. His rhythm, slow and sensuous, is erotic. What he does to time, the way he contorts it, makes it seethe, throb, pulsate, so that every beat of it feels charged with fear and desire, is erotic. Mulholland Drive the road traces its sinuous path through the Santa Monica Mountains, affording spectacular views of Hollywood, home of the movie industry, but also of the San Fernando Valley, home of the porn. And if the geographical separation between the two industries is narrow, the psychological isn't even that, the porn industry overtly about what the movie industry is covertly: sex and fantasy, objectification and exploitation. It's the movie industry without the pretense. Or the hypocrisy.

What the audition scene does too is make us consciously aware of Naomi Watts, like Betty an actress and, like Betty, a new face. We realize that if Betty is this good Watts must be even better. And the sympathy we felt for Betty—having to walk into that room and, on the spot, mesmerize, bring cold words on a page to dramatic life, and for a group of people whose surface niceness does little to disguise their essential boredom and impatience—we transfer to Watts. Moreover, we intuit that the reason Betty is such a knockout is because of how willing she is to expose herself: simulate first arousal and then shame and self-disgust so convincingly she appears to actually experience arousal, shame, and self-disgust. The psychic toll it takes on her to do what she does feels real, and we know it must be taking the same toll on Watts, who in the role of Betty will be asked to do far more. There's the sex scene, obviously. And, in the movie's second half, as Diane, she must look unloved, unwanted, and so spiritually sick as to seem contagious, not to mention masturbate while weeping, the camera's unblinking eye tight on her anguished face. (So vast is the difference between Watts hopeful and Watts hopeless that I was unsure, the first time I saw the movie, if Betty and Diane were played

by the same actress.) We are voyeurs, so we watch. Of course we watch. But we've been made to understand that by watching we're not just implicated in Betty's/Diane's/Watts's violation, we're complicit in it. Watching thus becomes a fraught activity, and almost unbearably visceral.



Naomi Watts and Harring.

From Photofest.

Casting (or David Lynch Is BOB)

BOB is the demonic entity in *Twin Peaks* who inhabits souls, including Leland Palmer's, causing Leland to rape and murder his own daughter. The statement in the header is an outrageous one, obviously, and I wasn't entirely serious when I made it. Just half. I don't believe Lynch is demonic, but I do believe he inhabits souls. How else to explain the performances he gets?

Mulholland most importantly, but *Lost Highway*, Lynch's 1997 L.A.-set neo-*noir*, first. Lynch has spoken of being under the influence of the O. J. Simpson case when he conceived it. In the role of the Mystery Man, the id of the protagonist, a musician who stabs his wife in a fit of jealous rage, Lynch cast Robert Blake. Blake would give the performance of his career. And four years later he became the star in a real-life L.A.-set neo-*noir*, the biggest since the Simpson case, when his wife, also romantically involved with Marlon Brando's son Christian, was shot outside a restaurant in Studio City. Blake was brought to trial for murder and, though acquitted, was, like Simpson, subsequently found guilty in a civil suit. Lynch's casting therefore isn't merely good, it's uncanny, even clairvoyant. Now, I wouldn't go so far as to suggest he be charged as Blake's accomplice. I would suggest, however, that he senses a reality in a person before it happens, one he can animate, activate, inspire.

Wrap your mind around this: Lynch cast Harring and Watts solely on the basis of their head shots and informal interviews. No auditions. There never are with him. Says Mary Sweeney, Lynch's editor, producer, and ex-wife, "David doesn't think about actors while he's writing his characters. When he looks at an actor's picture, he gets a feeling, and it needs to match his feeling about the character." Which it did with Harring, perfectly, three cherries in a row. Johanna Ray, Lynch's longtime casting director: "Oh, David went crazy for Laura's photo. He didn't want to see anyone else's." It's not hard to fathom why. Harring embodies a kind of pure sexual glamour that's rare these days. She's the second coming of Rita Hayworth, basically. Not just in looks—smoky yet vivid, ambiguous—but background as well. Actually, the background is more Gilda than Hayworth: moved from Mexico to the U.S. at 11, hit by a stray bullet from a drive-by shooting at 12, Miss El Paso, then Miss Texas, then Miss U.S.A., marries the great-great-grandson of Otto von Bismarck, a count, divorces him a few years later, though retains the title, and on to Hollywood. Very mysterious. Very *noir*. Something about Lynch I've left unstated but will now state: he has an aeolian-lyre quality. Meaning he's highly receptive to vibrations, viz., the spanking. And he requires an actor who can also catch a mood quickly. His direction to Harring was indirect, evocative: "David speaks in metaphors. When I was Rita, wounded and tormented, he said, 'Walk like a broken doll.' And then, when I was Camilla, the powerful one, he said, 'Walk like a kitty cat,' and that's all he said. I knew exactly what he meant, though—slow-moving, feminine, drive men crazy."

As Rita/Camilla, Harring is iconographic. She's a femme fatale, doubly so—first a femme who seems fated to die, then a femme who seems fated to cause others to die. As the one in the femme fatale's thrall, Watts has the more difficult task. Betty/Diane is a wildly, fantastically demanding role. Yet somehow Lynch knew she could handle it. Now, I'd like you to take a second and think about that "somehow." That "somehow" is key, monumental even. Because how, *how*, without any actual evidence, could he know? Is it because he understood, in his hyper-intuitive, shaman-esque way, that she was already living it? Watts, then 30, had been a professional actress for 13 years. But unlike her best friend, Nicole Kidman, she had yet to click. Ray: "I was shocked when people asked me afterward, 'How did you find Naomi?' I'd known how brilliant Naomi was for years. I brought her in for everything. I didn't realize the extent until I looked back at photos of my old auditions. She's in nearly every one. Only she wasn't getting the parts she deserved. And she was feeling so hopeless about her career she'd made the decision to give up acting when she got the call on *Mulholland*." Watts confirms: "It was bleak. I kept getting rejected. The feedback was that I was too intense. I was in New York with my family when I heard that David wanted to meet, and it was like, My God, the last time I changed my plans to go to an audition, I looked up and saw that the director actually had his eyes closed, was having a nap. I got a cheap ticket, went straight from the airport to Johanna's office. I noticed that David was asking me questions, looking me in the eye. I felt like I was

talking to a person, not somebody I had to fight to convince that I was right for the part. He was able to see beyond that mood I'd been bringing into the room and freaking people out with. He just opened me up."

I DON'T BELIEVE LYNCH IS DEMONIC, BUT I DO BELIEVE HE INHABITS SOULS.

So, an actress who feels she's failed as an actress plays a failed actress and is so extraordinary in the role she becomes a star. You could call that irony or you could call it something else. You could perhaps call it David Lynch, because the director seems to have an instinctive grasp, unparalleled, of how to fuse actor and role. I'm not so naïve or demented as to imagine Watts was simply playing herself in *Mulholland*. Actors who haven't made it account for half the population in L.A. Very few could do what Watts did. Moreover, in the years since, Watts has given a number of fine performances in other films. Her performance as Betty/Diane, however, is, I would argue, qualitatively different. It doesn't *feel* like a performance. It feels rawer, realer, beyond skill or artistry. The same is true of Dennis Hopper's performance as Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*. Hopper, whose problems with drugs and women were legendary, phoned Lynch before he was cast insisting, "I am Frank." And he *was*. As the Oedipally fixated, amyl-nitrite-huffing gangster tormenting Isabella Rossellini, he's more than convincing, he's electric. Watching the movie, you sense that at any moment he might leap from the screen, punch your lights out. With Hopper, as with Watts, there's something authentically primal, authentically primitive going on, which is why it's impossible to take your eyes off them. Or shake them. Frank Booth and Betty/Diane follow you out of the theater.

The Back of the Backstory (or Hey, Pretty Girl, Time to Wake Up)

I said that *Mulholland Drive* began with *Twin Peaks*, but I didn't say what *Twin Peaks* began with. David Lynch and *Twin Peaks*' co-creator Mark Frost first collaborated on *Goddess*, an adaptation of a Marilyn Monroe biography that focused on Monroe's final troubled days. *Goddess* was eventually put into turnaround, and Lynch and Frost moved on. Maybe, though, Lynch didn't. Monroe, after all, is the ultimate blonde in peril in Hollywood. She was a film actress who was also a capital-*A* Adult actress. (Don't forget, she started in nude pictures, and the source of her appeal was always pornographic—those twin peaks of hers that an entire generation of men aspired to climb—an idea she kidded, the real source of her appeal.) She's the foster child who had nothing, got everything, and yet ended up with nothing. She's the teen bride of a sheet-metal worker who went on to marry a sports hero, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, to seduce the president of the United States, and who killed herself in an empty bed, same as Diane. She's what every Betty hopes and fears to be: a movie star who becomes immortal, but only by dying while she's still young and beautiful, before her promise is broken or our

feelings about her can be resolved, leaving us wanting more, more, more. She's Los Angeles's angel, the Angel of Death, and she'll haunt us forever.

No, No, David Lynch Is Actually Rita

Please note: I'm not saying Lynch is Harring's second incarnation, Camilla, Woman the Destroyer, and unequivocally bad news. I'm saying he's Harring's first, Rita, neither good nor the opposite, in trouble though maybe trouble too, someone whose real self is unknown to us. And we're Betty, so far gone on his beauty and his mystery and his dark, sultry glamour we surrender to him totally, invite him into our aunt's apartment, run afoul of underworld figures, skip out on the director who could make us a star. We tell him we're in love with him, and he doesn't say the words back. But he doesn't stop kissing us either.

VIDEO: Naomi Watts Explains Her Big Break